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# Is Critical Reading Indispensable to College English for General Purpose in China?

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## Abstract

This paper aims to depict the current situation of application of critical reading skills and strategies among the undergraduates in reading books in English in a local university in the coastal city in China. The findings turn out that critical thinking strategies are used neither automatically nor frequently among the undergraduates. The findings are complemented by data collections from classroom observations, interviews, questionnaire, reading comprehension tests and notes taken in class. In order to have a better understanding of the reasons underlying the infrequent use of critical reading skills and strategies, a qualitative study was conducted in 12 volunteers. This study also reveals that college English for general purpose has, to some extent, contributed to improvement of students' use of critical thinking skills in reading. It is worth pointing out that the role of College English for General Purpose is not merely for imparting use of English to students but also taking on a vital role of cultivating students' critical thinking and enhancing the application of critical thinking skills and strategies in reading. This paper has implications for college English teachers in their teaching practice for desirability of enhancing critical thinking in college students. Explicit and systematic teaching of critical thinking strategies is surely encouraged, complete with critical writing in the process of teaching College English for the General Purpose.

**Key words:** Critical thinking; Critical reading skills and strategies; College English for general purpose

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## INTRODUCTION

Currently, a heated debate over the issue whether College English for General Purpose is here to stay or not. Quite a few EFL teachers are much concerned about their prospective positions. What is the focus of College English? Is College English for General Purpose outdated? Should it be replaced with EAP (English for Academic Purpose) or EGAP (English for General Academic Purpose)? Opinions on retaining College English for General Purposes are divided in the academic fields and among the practitioners. However, whatever will happen to College English for General Purpose, one thing is for sure to stay—critical reading. It is known to all that reading provides students with abundant sources of information. Besides, reading facilitates and enhances listening, speaking, writing and translation. When exposed to reading materials, students comprehend process and store the information, which is a vital source of background information or schemata (Li, 2013). In China, most of the students resort to reading so as to obtain the latest information or to acquire knowledge in their respective fields of interest even though the computer ownership and internet access prevail in most college students. Therefore, it lays bare that sustainable enhancement in students' reading competence is such a burning issue that it is worth much consideration and further study. What is more interesting is further discussion of college students' critical thinking, which is mainly cultivated in the process of critical reading.

## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 1.1 EFL / ESL Reading Comprehension and Difficulties in Reading Among the College Students

EFL/ESL reading is often defined as a process of unlocking meaning from connected text (Masoud &

Zoghi, 2010). A skilled reader can turn to both “bottom-up” and “top-down” approaches in the reading process, in which the reader is able to read accurately and fluently, decode phonological, lexical and semantic meaning, draw on background information stored in the long-term memory, try to remember what has been read, and have an idea of the main purpose for reading (Cain, Oakhill, & Bryant, 2003; Oakhill & Cain 2000; Sweet & Snow, 2003). Simultaneously, schemata are activated to facilitate understanding from a broad perspective (Ma, 2013). Currently, theories related to EFL / ESL reading attached more importance to meaningful construction, which is strongly advocated by Bransford and other scholars, who put forward three propositions in regards with reading comprehension through empirical studies. First of all, readers are supposed to understand the underlying meaning of a text. Secondly, reading is an incremental process, in which information is rounded up and integrated from various sources. Finally, reading is a matter of combining information acquired in the passage with the schemata stored in the long-term memory, during which meaning is decoded (Keiko, 2005). There is a growing evidence to indicate that reading is a complicated cognitive process, in which linguistic knowledge, cognitive competence and meta-cognitive competence interact with one another, bringing out meaning out of the context. Research conducted with EFL/ ESL students reveal that myriad potential sources of difficulties exist for poor readers. Some have deficits in low-level reading process like word reading and decoding (Cain & Oakhill, 1998; Oakhill, 2000; Oakhill, Cain, & Bryant, 2003; Yuill & Oakhill, 1991), others have weakness in high-order process of reading which involves working memory, synthesizing information in text, drawing inference, and applying meta-cognitive strategies (Cain & Oakhill, 1999; Cain et al., 1989). However, still others have difficulty in both low-level reading process and high-level process (Mahmood, 2014; Nonie, 2010).

Literature on college student reading competence is also found abundant in the academic field in China. Factors that may hinder progress in reading proficiency boil down to inadequate vocabulary, poor command of grammar which leads to poor judgment of long sentences or complex sentences, relatively slow reading speed (Yang, 1997; Qian, 2010). In view of college English syllabus and allocation of class time, evidence can be found in “limited attention span” among the college students so much so that students shun or even shiver at the mere thought of reading a long passage, let alone reference books in English (Huang, 2011, p.7). When it comes to the use of meta-cognitive and reading performance, another major factor is revealed that college students fail to apply self-regulatory strategies in the course of reading. Admittedly, self monitoring strategy is essential to information processing (Jin, 2011). However, as most of the studies of reading deficiency are conducted in the

English major undergraduates, research on undergraduates with engineering or science background is comparatively limited in our country (Wen, 2009).

## 1.2 Critical Reading

On balance, College English teaching in China is classified into two modes of teaching, that is, skill-oriented mode and critical thinking oriented one. The former centers on improving or enhancing undergraduates’ basic English skills, such as listening, reading, writing and speaking while the latter attaches importance to cultivating “ability to think and express critically with the use of English” (Lin, 2011). Critical thinking is generally believed to be nurtured through critical reading when readers relate their own value, attitude or evaluation to a text that they are reading. To some degree, critical thinking is “the art of analyzing and evaluating thinking with a view to improving it. It is self-directed, self-monitored, and self corrective thinking (Richards, 2008). Some Chinese scholars label it as an integration of cognitive competence and affective factors (Wen, 2009; Liu, 2013). So far, much weight has been given to improving undergraduates’ use of English as a language. However, relatively fewer efforts are given to raise their awareness in critical reading and to cultivate critical thinking, so it is not surprising that research on critical reading skills and strategies among the undergraduates with engineering or science background is limited (Liu & Guo, 2007; He, 2012).

Reading comprehension is divided into literal comprehension, interpretative understanding and critical reading, occurring interactively and sequentially (Crawley & Mauntain, 1995). Critical reading requires readers to pass judgment on the authenticity, logicity and effectiveness on the basis of understanding the literal meaning of a text. Besides, critical reading urges readers to ask questions while concentrating on the text with the purpose of a better understanding of the contents (Collins & Newman, 1990; Li, 2003; Pan, 2009). Therefore, readers are being active (as opposed to passive) in the critical reading process and engaging in a constant conversation with the writer. Readers do not necessarily take everything that the writer says in a text for granted. Instead, readers identify the major viewpoints, analyze facts, examples and statistics listed as evidence, get the implied meaning, and evaluate the appropriateness and consistency in reasoning. With these questions asked constantly, readers tend to focus more on the text, thus developing a clearer picture and a better understanding of the text.

## 1.3 Critical Reading Strategies

Critical reading involves three sequential steps, namely comprehension, appraisal and reflection (He, 2003). In fact, Critical reading strategies enable readers to differentiate the major viewpoints from the minor one, drawing inference, understand the writer’s position or

attitude, evaluate whether the evidence listed in the text is relevant, effective or logical, and reflect on the text and its impact on the readers' value, attitude and way of thinking.

As a rule, critical thinking strategies are as follows:

- identifying what is important in the text;
- distinguishing opinions from fact;
- distinguishing reasons from bias;
- evaluating the evidence (in other words, is evidence relevant, appropriate and reasonable?);
- evaluating the coherence of a text;
- deciding on whether the reader is on the side of the writer's point of view or against the writer's take;
- finding a good argument even if the reader does not agree with the writer's viewpoints;
- evaluating the text from the standpoint of consistence in its argument;
- reflecting on other evidence, points of evidence that are related to what the text is about;
- associating and comparing what is being read with what the reader has read previously;
- understanding the implications of what is being read;
- reaching conclusions on the basis of the reader's own reasoning or evidence;
- clarifying the discrepancy between the writer's understanding and the reader's; (Adapted from Critical Thinking at Study at Sussex <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/s3/?id=91>)

## 2. METHODS

### 2.1 Participants

The main objective of this study was to describe and analyze a cohort of undergraduate students in a local engineering university in China. A sample of convenience is used to explore a tip of an iceberg of the current situation of critical reading among local Chinese universities (as opposed to leading universities in China), most of which adopt skill-oriented teaching mode under the guidance of syllabus of College English for General Purpose. One hundred Forty-one sophomores from three classes were chosen for the questionnaire and reading tests, but valid questionnaire amounted to one hundred twenty-seven. Twelve students were chosen out of the volunteers for an interview later. All the subjects came from different parts of the country, with a history of learning English for over eight years more or less. All of them have learned College English for General Purpose in their first academic year. What is more, the ratio between boy students and girl students are 3:1, partially due to the fact that more boy students choose to major in engineering than girls in China.

### 2.2 Instruments for Data Collection

The data for this study were collected through a questionnaire, two reading tests (the average of two test scores was used), CET 4 scores (They have been

converted to match the reading scores on the 100-point basis), and an in-depth interview, complemented by the data from field notes, classroom observations, students' assignment and so on. The questionnaire was designed and conducted by the researchers to gather data on the students' self assessment of their use of critical reading strategies and major reading challenges. A Likert scale was employed in the questionnaire. The rating was ranged from one to five, with rating 5 indicating that respondents use the strategies all the time and rating 1 showcasing that respondent never resorts to the strategy mentioned. Additional data such as homework, notes taken in class and online real chats are gathered to look into the affective factors involved in their use of critical reading skills and strategies. Questions in the interview developed by researchers and some professors who were engaged in the field of teaching college English for General Purpose were open-ended. The interview lasting over 20 minutes was followed to probe into the potential factors that facilitate or hinder college students' adopting critical reading strategies. Twelve students were chosen for a later interview. With their consent, their conversation was recorded and transcribed verbatim for further study.

### 2.3 Data Collection Procedures

The questionnaire was conducted in class after their English teachers explained the purpose and requirements for this survey. Before they submitted their questionnaire, students were reassured of confidentiality about their answers to the questions in the questionnaire. As for the interview, twelve volunteers were picked out at random from the volunteers, with each signing a letter of consent before being interviewed. The interview lasted about twenty minutes. The interviews were all conducted in Chinese by two authors who worked together to obtain the information. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim for further analysis.

### 2.4 Data Analysis Procedures

The data obtained from the questionnaire were coded for statistical analysis. The Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS, Version 20.0) was used for the analysis, by which descriptive statistics were utilized to obtain the information related to the research. Classroom observations, lecture notes students took in class, assignment and interviews were coded and analyzed for several rounds to capture the recurring themes and categories.

### 2.5 Research Questions

- What critical reading strategies do college students use rather frequently in their EFL reading?
- What critical reading strategies do college students use rather infrequently in their EFL reading?
- Is there a significant difference between good readers and poor readers in this university?
- Is critical reading somewhat neglected in College English for General Purpose?

### 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Quantitative studies:

First of all, collect data about the 127 students' use

of critical reading strategies, reading scores, and CET 4 (College English Test Band 4) scores are shown in the following Table 1.

**Table 1**  
**Chinese College Students' Self Evaluation of Use of Critical Reading Strategies, Reading Scores and CET 4 Scores (Descriptive Statistics)**

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. deviation
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. error
Reflecting on the contents	127	4.00	1.00	5.00	2.3465	.09706
Comparing similar topics	127	4.00	1.00	5.00	2.5118	.10539
Analyzing the reasoning	127	4.00	1.00	5.00	2.5748	.09906
Summarizing the gist	127	4.00	1.00	5.00	2.5984	.08962
Activating background information	127	4.00	1.00	5.00	2.6378	.09464
Asking questions all the time	127	4.00	1.00	5.00	2.8504	.09292
Evaluating the writer's point of view	127	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.1811	.08903
Understanding the text from the writer's view	127	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.2362	.10090
Differentiating writer's view from readers' own	127	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.3622	.07637
Skimming for main ideas	127	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.3622	.09596
Utilizing titles and subtitles	127	5.00	.00	5.00	4.0000	.09354
Keeping main ideas in mind while reading	127	3.00	2.00	5.00	4.0472	.07814
CET 4 scores( converted)	127	40.00	42.00	82.00	61.3858	.70041
Reading scores	127	60.00	30.00	90.00	64.8031	1.14476
Valid N	127					

As is revealed in this descriptive Table 1, college students' use of critical reading strategies, on the basis of their self assessment, are inclined to be quite infrequent and sporadic (averaged at 3.06), except for a couple of strategies, like keeping the main ideas of a text in mind while reading (4.05), scanning the titles and subtitles to get the gist (4.00), skimming for the main points (3.35) and etc.

What looms larger is that college students did poorly in their after-reading activities, such as reflecting on the impact of the text on their own attitude, way of thinking or value (2.35), comparing or contrasting the ideas or viewpoints in the text with ones they previously formulated in their minds (2.52), and analyzing how the

reasoning is developed and how the conclusion is reached (2.58) and etc. What is more, other critical reading strategies, such as activating background knowledge (2.60), asking themselves questions constantly in the reading process and evaluating the writer's viewpoints (2.85), are employed infrequently.

In order to have a clearer picture of the relation between critical reading strategies and reading performance, a further comparison is made between good readers and struggling readers among the subjects. Good readers are defined as those who scored over 80 points (N=14) in the reading comprehension tests while poor readers are those who scored below 50 points (N=13) in the reading tests.

**Table 2**  
**Paired Samples Test of Good Readers and Struggling Readers in Respect of Their CET4 Scores and Reading Scores**

		Paired differences					t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. deviation	Std. error mean	95% Confidence interval of the difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	CET(g)–CET4(s)	129.85	42.64	11.83	104.08	155.61	10.98	12	.000
Pair 2	Reading Test (g)–Reading Test (s)	33.08	3.25	.90	31.11	35.04	36.67	12	.000

(g)-good readers (s)-struggling readers

Paired Samples Test between good readers and struggling readers is conducted, and two-tailed significance of both their CET 4 scores and reading scores amounted to .000, considerably lower than 0.05. It can be

understood that the difference between good readers and struggling readers is significant.

Comparison of strategies good readers most frequently use made with those that poor readers adopt laid bare the fact that it was quite interesting that good



readers and poor readers were liable to use similar critical reading strategies, like memorizing the gist while reading a text, paying attention to the titles and subtitles to get the gist of a text, and reassessing the writer's view after reading a text. However, a marked difference lied in the frequency of using these strategies between two groups. Besides, good readers, like poor readers, seldom or rarely reflected on the contents of a text after reading it, or analyzed how reasoning is made in a text and etc. What's worth mentioning is that asking questions constantly while reading is averaged at 3.05 among the good readers but at 2.90 among the struggling ones. It seems that students used this strategy at times. Activating background knowledge, another strategy vital to success of reading comprehension, was unfortunately less resorted to in both good readers (2.87) and poor readers (2.80) in terms of frequency.

It is obvious that the students being surveyed did not use critical reading strategies frequently in their reading.

Their awareness and application of some strategies were relatively weak. They rarely reflected on or clarified the impact that a text may have exerted on their way of thinking or judgment, not to mention evaluating the effectiveness, appropriateness or logicity of evidence. They seemed to be too ready to take whatever the writers put in a text, without passing their own judgment. To some extent, they were passively engaged in reading, being contented with interpreting the meaning. However, most of college students failed to go deeper and further into the context, finding themselves engaged in conversing with the writers and exchanging ideas and viewpoints.

#### Qualitative Study:

The qualitative study aimed to inquire into underlying factors that might prevent the college students from applying critical reading strategies in their reading. After several rounds of coding and analyzing, recurring themes appeared that might account for their poor use of critical reading strategies.

**Table 3**  
**Factors That May Hinder Use of Critical Reading Strategies**

Factors that contributed to poor use of critical reading strategies	Frequency
Knowing little about some critical reading strategies like evaluating viewpoints, passing own judgment	9
College English teachers did not introduce these strategies systematically in class	9
Spending limited time on reading in English, mainly for the sake of exams	8
Rarely doubting what is acquired from books or from teachers	8
Relatively few hours devoted to activities like brainstorming, group discussions, debates and etc. in College English classes	7
Rarely reading reviews in English magazines or books	5
Having limited practice in critical writing on the basis of texts learnt	3
Making no attempts to compare or contrast with what is being read with background knowledge	2

Though the students had learnt College English for General Purpose for two academic semesters, there is little evidence that they are fully aware of the importance of critical reading. There are barely any signs that they apply critical reading strategies in their reading automatically. A multitude of factors contribute to their infrequent use of critical reading strategies, and both the teachers and students hold themselves accountable.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

### 4.1 Explicit and Systematic Teaching of the Critical Reading Strategies is to Be Encouraged or Even Advocated in College English for General Purpose

Critical reading strategies are indispensable to cultivation of critical reading which plays a vital part in nurturing critical thinking in the college students. Several students mentioned that classes of College English were merely continuation of High School English, focusing on use of English language. "Our English teachers usually explained the use of words and translated the long sentences into Chinese" (Student B). Though some reading strategies like skimming and scanning were emphasized and

practiced regularly in College English classes, other strategies related to critical thinking are seldom touched upon, not to mention introducing major critical thinking strategies to students systematically and explicitly. As Student E said that they were taught how to make use of background knowledge to understand the implied meaning, to differentiate opinions from facts. However, they were not taught how to evaluate whether the writer's viewpoint was biased or not, nor were they shown how to justify the writer's views by the evidence at hand.

It further proves the fact that College English for General Purpose has given too much weight to vocabulary and grammar teaching at the expense of raising the students' awareness of critical reading (Li, 2002; Zhu, 2011). Therefore, teachers are encouraged to ask more quality questions in classes to demonstrate how critical reading strategies are applied in the process of reading comprehension.

### 4.2 Students Are Encouraged to Broaden Their Scope of Knowledge and Spend More Time on Reading Critically

Over 84% students in the questionnaire said that they spent about one and a half hours on English learning (doing their assignment included) every week. Nearly 75%

students replied that they did not even read an English novel in a year. Over 73% students used American TV serials or British TV serials as their major source of learning English in their free time, and 91% percent students chose to watch TV serials with lines translated into Chinese.

I used to read newspapers in English in high school, for my English teachers urged us to do so. However, I am so preoccupied with experiments in the lab and practice in the workshop that I have little time to spare on English. I don't read English novels, newspapers or magazines. What interested me most was watching American TV serials, like Broken Sisters, Revenge, Prison Breakers, just to name a few. (Student K)

As an engineering student, I don't read as broadly as students majoring in liberal arts. Most of my spare time is devoted to playing games, from which I picked up some Japanese and Korean languages instead of English. I suffered a lot when I came across passages about economics, politics or cultures, for I had almost no background knowledge to turn to. (Student C)

Therefore, it is a daunting task to encourage the students majoring engineering to read more extensively in English to cultivate their sense of critical reading. Formative evaluation is to be adopted, with a bigger portion of credit given to students' critical reading practice and critical writing on the topics or issues that they came across in the texts.

#### 4.3 Critical Thinking Is Strongly Advocated With a Long-Term Goal

Students are somewhat accustomed to accepting whatever is said in books or taught by teachers. Therefore, they are more inclined to share the writers' viewpoints, without giving a second thought to whether such stands or attitudes were justified, logic or rational or not.

I have never had such a thought that the author could be biased or something. I was taught to believe in what was said in books or by teachers, for we had been taught to believe in authorities, such as textbooks, teachers and etc." A few of my classmates aired their own views on the text; however, most of them were laughed at or criticized. (Student A)

It is high time that College English for General Purpose realized the weakness in their teaching practice and took immediate and effective measures to encourage students to think on their own by teaching them how to identify strength and weakness in an argument, how to analyze evidence and opinions, how to evaluate the viewpoints and their impact, and how to clarify misunderstanding. A strategic and long-term target is to be set, with attainable goals to be achieved in each semester of College English learning.

#### 4.4 Critical Writing and Critical Argument Are Complementary in Turns Enhancing Critical Reading

As is revealed in the questionnaire, the students did fairly well in pre-reading activities, like scanning the titles or subtitles, skimming for the main ideas and etc. The sad truth is that most of the time in class is allocated to explanation of texts, leaving a little time for debates,

brainstorming or presentation, which is intrinsic to enhancement of critical reading and critical thinking.

As we only had one English class which lasted one hour and a half every week, our teachers seldom spent time on group discussions, debates or brainstorming, and our minds were crammed with teachers' instructions and lecture notes. (Student J)

Since critical reading, critical writing and critical argument contribute considerably to critical thinking (Richard Paul, 2007), College English teachers resort to a variety of in-class and after-class activities to improve critical reading. Take it for an example, group discussions, debate over current issues, writing on the topics discussed in the text, sharing reading notes with peers and etc..

Above all, the findings in the questionnaire and interviews manifest themselves that most college students surveyed were contented with decoding and interpreting the meaning of a text, without making further efforts to be critical of what they had read. Nevertheless, there is a distinctive difference between good readers and struggling readers in terms of frequency of using critical reading strategies, which can be interpreted as that a good use of critical reading strategies contributes to a better comprehension. The findings also shed more light on the fact that the college students' poor or infrequent use of critical reading strategies in the course of reading comprehension. It is fairly attributable to both teachers' lack of focus on nurturing critical thinking in class and students' inadequate reading practice after class. It is generally believed that College English for General Purpose is sure to be reformed (Nian & Wu, 2012), fortunately, there is still more room for further improvement in respect of raising students' awareness of critical thinking. In other words, more weight should be given to cultivation of critical reading and critical writing with the purpose of enhancing college students' critical thinking abilities (Wen, 2010; He 2012; Li, 2006; Huang, 2013). What is more, teachers are supposed to take proactive measures by explaining explicitly the major critical reading strategies in the classroom and by demonstrating how these strategies are applied in reading so that students will follow the lead and practice them frequently and automatically in the process of reading, thus generating more interest and motivation in learning English as a foreign language (He & Liu, 2003; Hu, Wu & Zhuang, 2011; Luo, 2011).

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